SONNETS

by

William R. Eustis

Little Compton Historical Society
Summer 1996.

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Volume IV in a series of
publications in honor of
Carlton C. Brownell printed
by the Little Compton
Historical Society.

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INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Bill Eustis surfaced when we were gathering material for the Little Compton Historical Society's publication for 1995, *Little Compton Remembers World War II, 1945-1995*. Seven of his sonnets were printed in that volume and discerning readers were quick to note that they are special. Indeed they are, and the slender corpus of his sonnets is presented here *in toto*, no connection between these poems and the World War II book being intended. The poems will stand by themselves and they will speak for themselves.

In the aggregate there are sixteen sonnets, enough to be considered a sonnet cycle. Thirteen deal with the poet's experiences during World War II; three more record a more recent personal trial, but are clearly related to the other poems. It is remarkable that all were composed in the mid-to-late 1980s by a man in his sixties whose previous poetic efforts had all but ceased by the end of the 1940s. And as Bill Eustis admits, in writing these sonnets in the '80s he found infinite pleasure but never did he agonize so much.

William Wordsworth's famous dictum that poetry is "emotion recollected in tranquility" is applicable. Bill Eustis was taken prisoner by the Japanese after a mid-air collision over Truk in the Caroline Islands. That was in January 1945 and he was removed to a camp in Ofuna, Japan, on January 26th where he was held until he was released on August 29th, 1945. The process of externalizing some of his experience could only come with time, and forty years or so later it happens in English sonnet form. Poetry is our most powerful form of expression; these poems, rooted in experience, tell it like it is and they are history.

Most of us have read Randall Jarrell's *Death of the Ball Turret Gunner* and perhaps a few other poems related to World War II. But there does not seem to be a significant corpus of poems by a given poet or a school of poets coming out of or pertaining to the conflict of those years. If in fact these things exist they do not readily come to mind. In other words there is nothing comparable to the *oeuvre* of the famous Trench Poets of 1914-1918. But we do have these sonnets by Bill Eustis and they are of unique value and significance.

The poet's use of the English sonnet form is admirable, form and content complementing one another with sound and sense, rhyme and reason. The quatrains are flexible, the concluding couplets are pithy, and the rhymes are functional without being trivial or trite. What might be lacking in innovative tropes is compensated for by vigor and a controlled point of view. These are strong poems from the stark drama of No. 2, to the insistence of No. 10, the terrible pathos of No. 11, or the stoic empathy of No. 14. There is no artificiality; the expression is consistently compact and intense.

For the reader who might like some added insight of a broad and peripheral nature we recommend Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific* (William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York, 1994). And special thanks to Phebe Chace, Frederick Pullman, and Victor Terras who recognized the merits of these sonnets right away and insisted that they be printed.

– – Nathaniel B. Atwater

Bill Eustis standing on the wing of his P-39 fighter plane on Makin, Gilbert Islands, ca. January 1944.

The following are transcriptions of three telegrams sent to Dr. Richard S. Eustis by the War Department between February and September 1945, the originals being too faded for satisfactory reproduction. They suggest an unusual experience.

1. February 5, 1945:

> THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRET THAT YOUR SON FIRST LIEUTENANT WILLIAM R. EUSTIS HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION SINCE FOURTEEN JANUARY IN PACIFIC OCEAN AREA IF FURTHER DETAILS OR OTHER INFORMATION ARE RECEIVED YOU WILL BE PROMPTLY NOTIFIED J A ULIO THE ADJUTANT GENERAL.

2. February 24, 1945:

> THE SECRETARY OF WAR ASKS THAT I ASSURE YOU OF HIS DEEP SYMPATHY IN THE LOSS OF YOUR SON FIRST LIEUTENANT WILLIAM R. EUSTIS WHO WAS PREVIOUSLY REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION REPORT NOW RECEIVED STATES HE WAS KILLED IN ACTION FOURTEEN JANUARY IN PACIFIC OCEAN AREA CONFIRMING LETTER FOLLOWS ULIO THE ADJUTANT GENERAL.

3. September 5, 1945:

I AM EXTREMELY PLEASED TO INFORM YOU THAT A CORRECTED REPORT HAS BEEN RECEIVED FROM THE COMMANDING GENERAL OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN AREA WHICH STATES THAT YOUR SON FIRST LIEUTENANT WILLIAM EUSTIS WHO WAS PREVIOUSLY REPORTED KILLED IN ACTION RETURNED TO MILITARY CONTROL TWENTY NINE AUGUST AFTER HAVING BEEN LIBERATED FROM A JAPANESE PRISONER OF WAR CAMP DEEPLY REGRET GRIEF CAUSED BY PREVIOUS ERRONEOUS REPORT BUT SHARE YOUR JOY IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT YOUR SON IS ALIVE THIS WILL CONFIRM TELEPHONIC NOTIFICATION MADE TO YOU THIS AFTERNOON BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL WEIR. A FURTHER CONFIRMING LETTER FOLLOWS WITSELL ACTING THE ADJUTANT GENERAL.

An Army Air Corps P-38 fighter plane collides in mid-air with a Japanese Zero over Truk, Caroline Islands, January 14, 1945.

1.

Weep not for me, for I have greeted death,
Raised my bloodied hand, caressed his face,
Inhaled that final hopeless screaming breath –
Yet lived! No, weep for him whose last embrace –
The shattered limbs, the numb insensate pain,
The mangled fingers to that self-same cheek –
Infinity too soon! No more again
To scale the tendrilled scarps, no more to seek
The treasure lofts that lie 'neath heaven's floor.
No more to swoop, look lightning in the eye,
Plumb canyons of delight, soar pinnacles in awe:
No more to roam the pastures of the sky.
    I see him still, a shadow cresting free.
    Oh weep for him who now is one with me.

Taken prisoner January 17, the pilot is paraded before a gathering of enemy troops.

2.

He teeters numbly in the sweltering haze,
One battered thigh immobile, wrists strung taut
Behind his back. A blindfold masks his gaze
But not the alien throats athirst for sport
Nor worse – so near – the circling measured squeal
Of a leather shoe. A sudden jarring rasp –
The scabbard screech of new-drawn angry steel –
Assaults his sense, chokes off his startled gasp.
So now, with no more future left to face
It comes to this, a gross and obscene joke.
He stiffens, wills himself the pride of grace,
Head rising high to meet the cleaving stroke.
    No, do not ask him why he chanced that day
    To touch the edge of time and turn away.

A winter dawn frozen in memory. Naval
Interrogation Camp, Ofuna, Japan.
February 1945.

3. He stands entranced. The window now a bridge,
A light-year leap to some remembered scene:
New-fallen snow upon the wooded ridge
Beyond the stockade wall, stark-frozen, clean
Against the cloudless sun-bright sky. No sound
Within the compound or without; all share
A dazzling pendant world of grace profound
With myriad sparklings in the crystal air.
And then, from far aloft beyond his sight,
Plummeting the silence of the sky,
The cataclysmic call to endless night:
The raucous, free-flung, taunting corvine cry.
The dream and he fall shattered to the floor
Like shards awash upon an alien shore.

A matter of self-recognition. July 1945.

4.

The compound sprawls inert beneath the glare
Of summer's heat. Even the swollen flies
Lie torpid, grounded by the weight of air.
The walking bones eschew the sun; they prize
The runnelled dust that limns the barrack walls,
The crooked route from shade to stagnant shade . . .
A flicker in a window pane forestalls
His step. Dark-mirrored there a masquerade:
A stranger with a ghastly skin-tight face,
A travesty of skull and leathered bone,
Has dared invade his private breathing space.
He whirls, and stands transfixed: he is alone.
He shrugs, moves on. One does not dwell on death
When life is measured breath by numbered breath.

A purloined treat is shared. Summer 1945.

5. He holds within his fist a purloined treat,
A banquet rare as a comet's stately crawl
Across the sky ablaze in mid-day heat.
And here, between the rough-hewn barrack wall
And massive fence that hems their hapless world
He shares it with a friend. It is not much:
A mass of blackened day-old rice, dried and curled
Like carboned maggot husks. But it is such
As dreamers crave – and dreams alone sustain.
He smiles and nods; his friend's eyes understand.
For this – for cattle feed – he will profane
His cross and kneel at mammon's outstretched hand.
When faith is mocked, I do not find it odd
That men choose grains of rice and spurn their god.

Malnutrition overcomes a friend,
ca. August 1, 1945.

6.

The man lay supine in the matted cell,
Hands priest-folded, chin upright, a bare
Faint benediction on his face. A smell
Of exudation stained the unstirred air:
Our chapel incense, raw, untempered, green.
Upon his bloodless lips there was a trace –
A hint, not yet a smile – of glimpses seen
Of galleoned galaxies on seas of grace,
A cosmos yet unformed. A swollen fly
Now stalked his brow as if to claim its own.
Not yet, I said, and stilled each sightless eye:
So much for dreams, so much for hopes outgrown.
I touched my limbs, and sniffed my own decay.
I too will take a journey, galaxies away.

The body awaits disposal.

7.

I scuff some dirt upon his ravaged frame.
His bier, the dust along the barrack wall;
His cerecloth, sacks of rough-stitched straw. No name
In stone above his head; no trumpet call,
No cannon roar; no sky-torn barrel roll,
No mournful dip of wings; no damsel scarf
Around his throat; no steeple's solemn toll . . .
He smiled each day, and daily died by half
Until flesh fed on flesh and was no more.
He would not curse his captors' fond neglect
But shared the trivial froth of young men's lore –
And dreams of meeting death with self-respect.
One petal flutters to his grave, the lone
Last tear that I was saving for my own.

A lesson in self-awareness. Summer 1945.

8.

We did not like the man. His whining ways
And grievous groans bespoke a false intent,
As if such pious wails were cause for praise
And he would make of them a sacrament.
But he had salt – and salt was sweetest gold
To starving fleshless men. Salt! The thought
Consumed the mind, made beggars of the bold,
And lured them one by one in last resort
To genuflect in turn at his cell door.
But I, I would not kneel in that man's pew;
My strength lay strong within, so I forbore –
And then I found that I was mortal too.
    That priceless gift, the grace that we exalt,
    I threw away for thirty grains of salt.

Rumors of a new, incomprehensible bomb,
August 17, 1945.

9.

The walking dead stood round in disbelief.
Reprieve? It could not be! The naked thought
Ran counter to the core, a daydream thief
That sapped the lifeblood of the soul and brought
Illusion's hope. Survival was the will
To glimpse yet one more day, no more:
That one last firm resolve, that we not fill
The mind with froth from some remembered shore,
The wind-spun grist of those resigned to die.
Thus when with upswept arm the guard intoned
One sky, all men; all men, one sky
Such blasphemy was not to be condoned.
    But yet if true – if dreams might now hold sway –
    What of the will to last that one more day?

War's end: one man's reaction. August 1945.

10. Ask not of me that I should mourn their fate,
Deplore their scorched and mutilated land –
Their agonies of flame – nor rue the weight
Of doom now lifted from my upraised hand
To sear their brows in cataclysmic rain.
Ask not of me that sacrifice be mine
Nor that my love transcend all mortal pain:
Ask not of me a testament divine.
I am unheeded dross, the living dead
Who measures time in reckoned breaths, who dies
Unheard, unsung. And if their skin be shred,
And I survive, no tears will veil my eyes.
Compassion is a coinage long since spent.
Ask not that I forgive: I am content.

An Army Air Corps P-39 fails to rejoin its flight following a raid on Mille, Marshall Islands, January 16, 1944.

11. His ship veers off, a soft wide spiral turn
As if some vortex point his new-found tomb.
The long flight home forgot, of no concern
To one whose abject fate is to assume
A beggar's choice: to sway in hapless shrouds
Wind-spun, to lap the sea in gentle splash,
Or rend the shrieking air and cleave the clouds
In one horrendous headlong plunging dash:
To end it with a scream or sigh. The sea,
Uncaring, waits. The flight's receding drone
Fades in the towering skies, home-bound, free.
He falls unmarked, untended, unbearably alone.
His only words, "So long, old friend," still race
The swirling parapets of selfless grace.

A friend's reaction to the reported loss of a fellow pilot over Truk. Saipan, January 14, 1945.

12. A ship went down – in flames was the report –
Though no one claimed to spot a parachute
Or mark the splash of wreckage. It was thought
The pilot's future doubtful, if not moot:
A routine raid, a routine loss. The word
Was later passed to base, received with rage
By one who strove to fly in search, to gird
Seven hundred miles of heaving sea, assuage
By solitary flight the wound within; to wave
His wings in custom-gesture of farewell,
One last crescendo roll through heaven's nave
In cloud-tipped echo of an airman's knell.
Though some say he's a fool who shows no fear,
Such foolish faith is what a friend holds dear.

Aboard the USS Benevolence, Tokyo Bay. An injured naval officer is brought into a ward-room filled with newly-liberated prisoners of war. August 29-30, 1945.

13. That rarity, a man robust, the tint
Of pinkness on his skin, lay wrapped in groans;
Late casualty of war, a banjo splint
Stretching his shattered toes. The walking bones
Who had survived the camps recoiled in wrath;
I chewed him out, lavished him with shame . . . .
Fast friends for years, we chalked his epitaph
One summer's day above his fleshless frame.
Your choice, I said, misfortune's hapless child
Or man of passing grace. Damn you again,
He said. But later, at the end, he smiled
And touched my hand: I couldn't see, back then,
What you had known, that when we come to die
It's how we go that matters, not the why.

A later world, a later time: my wife is informed
of an inoperative carcinoma of the lung.
January 1982.

14. She clung to me that dreadful doomsday night
As if her very marrow reeked of fear:
That time no longer stretched beyond her sight
But now lay measured, finite, fateful, near.
And I who once had stared in numbing dread
At my own end went cold inside again.
The lonesome voyage of the living dead:
The glimpse of alien shores outside their ken
Where roiling mists reveal an unknown hell . . .
Her tremors cease, the journey has begun.
I mumble unheard words and clutch the shell
Of one whose mortal core is now undone.
There is no last farewell. When hope is flown
The looming edge of time is faced alone.

Her final hours, at her mother's home.
March 1984.

15. She stared at an unseen wall, stark fear,
Astonishment and bitter shocked dismay
Chiseled on her face. No pretense here:
The future now, a fingertip away.
And I, remembering how I once mistook
A ghastly mirrored mask as not my own,
Stood transfixed, haunted by that self-same look . . .
She turns: the starburst in her eyes alone
Reflects her glimpse of undiscovered space,
A lonesome journey to a world apart,
A quest to undertake with matchless grace:
Not death, but dying is the lonely art.
No words were said, for what could words foretell.
We simply smiled, and nodded in farewell.

To M.M.E. - and her like.

16. I hold my sorrow for those living dead –
The rare transcendent few – the peerless kind
Who never plumb their depth with solid lead
Until the looming of the end, then find
A soul-core strength they had not sensed before.
It's then I see the glint of guts, the grace
Surmounting fear. And I know something more:
That each has touched a stranger's mirrored face
And soared above the need for man's conceit.
These treasured few, each with that matchless trait,
That primal urge which would deny defeat
And scorn the rank discourtesy of fate.
Ah yes, I weep for them, for they have shown
A mortal fiber stronger than my own.